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UNCLASSIFIED--THE TURKS AND CAICOS ISLANDS

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THE TURKS AND CAICOS ISLANDS

The Turks and Caicos Islands are a Crown Colony of the United Kingdom located southeast of the Bahama Islands some 90 miles north of the Dominican Republic and Haiti. The islands, like the Bahamas, are the exposed peaks of a large submerged limestone plateau which drops off precipitously to the Atlantic Ocean floor to the north and to several trenches, some over 6,000 feet deep, that dissect the plateau. One of these, the Turks Island Passage separates the Turks Islands from the Caicos Islands. Another trench, the Caicos Passage, to the west, runs between the Caicos Islands and the Bahamas. A third, the Mouchoir Passage, separates the Turks Islands from the Mouchoir Bank to the southeast.

The Colony consists of some 30 islands and cays of which only 6 are inhabited. Although the land area is only 193 square miles, the total area, including the territorial sea, is about 6,000 square miles.* The landscape of the Turks and Caicos is rather barren. Here and there there are little pockets of soil which support a scrubby bush-type vegetation and a limited subsistence agriculture. Mangrove swamps are common along the inner, or "back" coasts of the islands.

The Turks and Caicos have a pleasant tropical climate. The scanty rainfall (20-22 inches annually) favors the developing tourist industry, but is hard on the farmers. Such rainfall as they do receive percolates quickly through the porous limestone, and any significant economic developments would probably require construction of desalting facilities.

Most of the Colony's 5,700 residents are of African descent. There is a high female - male ratio because young men have always tended to leave the islands to seek work; mainly in the neighboring Bahamas, but many also continue on to Jamaica, the United States and Canada.

The Islands' economy is meager and is heavily dependent on the United States in the areas of transportation, shipping, manufactured goods, and tourism. Also during the past year the islands adopted the U.S. dollar as the official currency.

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*This figure is based on a three mile territorial limit. The Turks and Caicos also have a twelve mile fishing zone.

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Its traditional money-makers, salt production and fishing are both currently depressed, although the fledgling tourist industry is gradually expanding. In the barrier reef, which nearly surrounds both groups of islands, the formation of lace, antler, and staghorn coral as well as the bonefish, jacks, and groupers should prove to be a great attraction for skin divers and sport fishermen. Another related type of development has also come to the islands in the form of expensive resort and retirement homesites. So far these have been constructed on only two islands, Providenciales and Pine Cay, both in the Caicos.

In recent months the possibility that one or more oil companies might be interested in building refineries in the Turks and Caicos has come to light. There are four suitable sites: three are located on the Caicos Passage; two on the uninhabited island of West Caicos, and one at the western end of Providenciales. The fourth, smaller than the others, is on the southern tip of Salt Cay, on Mouchoir Passage. Esso Interamerica holds an option for a site on West Caicos and another American company has expressed interest in the Salt Cay site. Although the islands are almost completely surrounded by coral reefs these sites appear to have clear access to nearby deep waters (See enclosed N.O. Chart, no. 26260). Either of these projects would generate a relatively massive investment in housing and in other sectors of the local economy.

Between two and three hundred American servicemen and civilians are stationed in the Turks and Caicos. Under agreements with the British, the U.S. Government maintains a U.S. Air Force tracking station and a U.S. Naval facility on Grand Turk. A U.S. Coast Guard LORAN station is located on South Caicos.

In February 1974, Christian Science Monitor writer James Nelson Goodsell reported that there is a group of local legislators in the Turks and Caicos who favor severing their traditional ties with the United Kingdom, and associating themselves politically and economically with Canada.... perhaps eventually as a Province. The strength of this group is not known and no official Canadian reaction to this proposal has been announced.

